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ABSTRACT

Distance education has developed into a variety of correspondence courses, covering a wide range of subject matter. Distance education systems operate on all continents, at levels from primary to university and through the nonformal and vocational. The variation selected must meet a given need and be appropriate to available resources. Many problems that new distance learning institutions have to face have common elements, including budget, information and communication, and improvement of quality. Quality involves five different elements. First, materials must be learner friendly, academically respectable, able to be used by the average student, interesting in content and layout, and relevant. Second, learning materials and any peripheral media or equipment must be available. Third, tutors and students need to become familiar with distance learning methodology and practice. Fourth, the whole system must be managed effectively. Fifth, monitoring, evaluation, and feedback must be viewed as important. Formative evaluation allows the system and its materials to be improved continuously. Summative evaluation monitors educational effectiveness, relevance of programs, and economic viability. Feedback--information--is required at the correct time to enable remedial action to be taken. (YLB)

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THE COMPARATIVE NATURE OF QUALITY

Distance Education in the Developing World

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THE COMPARATIVE NATURE OF QUALITY

Distance Education in the Developing World

The Context

Distance Education has an honourable tradition going back to the start of effective postal services about 150 years ago. Over the years it developed into a variety of correspondence courses, covering a wide range of subject matter. Some of these courses were of excellent quality but many poor courses have been foisted onto an unsuspecting public.

In the post World War II period Distance Education went into an accelerated phase of development, especially at the university level. The whole system was given a tremendous boost by the establishment of the British Open University (OU) in 1969. An imaginative and charismatic founding Vice-Chancellor led the Open University through its first ten years. Now it offers degrees, diplomas and certificates in academic, vocational and individual interest areas, that are recognised for their worth and quality.

The OU uses a multi media integrated distance learning system. Distance Education systems now operate on all the continents, at levels from primary to university and through the non formal and vocational. There are many variations of model but whichever is selected must meet a given need and be appropriate to available resources.

The Indonesian Open Junior Secondary School (SMPT)

The Indonesian Open Junior Secondary School, SMPT, has emerged from a perceived national need. With the acceptance that the existing Junior Secondary School system could not absorb all the children it was supposed to, an alternative was piloted in 1979 with the establishment of SMPTs. In 1990 nine years compulsory education was introduced and more SMPTs were required to meet the need. The concept of distance learning at the Junior Secondary level had been accepted and was seen as a viable alternative system.

It would have been useful at that stage to have a detailed Baseline Study looking at demographic and educational issues but that did not happen until much later. The programme had to be implemented quickly, learning from its experience and absorbing outside, international support through a UNESCO project.

The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU)

IGNOU, the Indira Ghandi National Open University, also had to start offering courses before all of its systems were in place. A longer planning period was required but there was pressure for an early start. Unlike the UKOU where most materials are prepared internally, IGNOU had to develop

procedures for the quality of its course offerings which were mainly written by outside writers. Like the Israel Open University, who operate a similar system, considerable pressure is placed on internal staff to ensure coherence and quality across a course.

The problems

Many of the problems that new distance learning institutions have to face have common elements. These include:

Budget

To talk of the effective dissemination of any activity without an adequate budget is unrealistic. The budget is the determining factor in the scope of the operation. It needs to cover studies, research and evaluation; materials and location development; materials production and dissemination; professional training and development; monitoring of effectiveness; student support; recruitment of adequate staff numbers, ie hands to do the work.

The budget needs to be part of a larger scheme, a Master Plan, which will allow managers to plan their activities coherently, at least a year ahead of time. If planning is dependent in the 1992/93 year for budget decisions only taken in March '92, then there will inevitably be a hiatus, a

break, until the planners are aware of what resources are available to them.

Budgets appear to have little problem with buildings and equipment. However, when it comes to HRD, Human Resource Development, there are problems. Distance education staff will require additional training as a new methodology requires new skills for the preparation of materials that take on part of the role of the teacher. Materials must be created and produced that are different from formats that were previously used. There are new skills required, like project management, almost an industrial process that involves an ability to deal with scheduling, logistics and management. Training takes time and costs money. Has the budget taken this sufficiently into account?

Information and Communication

Dissemination of distance education involves both the spread of a concept, in this case distance learning and the physical growth of the institution. The concept needs to be understood by decision makers and managers at all levels so that they can enable the process to develop unimpeded. Just as the materials developers need to be trained, so do the decision makers and the managers.

Equally important, people at the community level require to

understand what is happening to themselves and their children. If there is any suspicion that they are being fobbed off with some inferior or irrelevant alternative they will soon reject the distance education option. Information about the distance education programmes, its status and functions, and the reasonable expectations for the students (can they go on to high school, jobs, university?) must be available for parents, students and community.

Acceptance within the community is more likely and distance education accepted as a positive alternative if information is accessible and there is provision for questions to be answered and concerns allayed.

Improving the Quality

Building a distance education institution has no real meaning or impact if the learning materials it has are not of good quality. Materials of good quality are of little use if they are not available when the students need them. Materials of good quality are only effective if the students know how to use them and their tutors give them support in their new learning mode. Students and tutors must work in a system that is well managed, that enables rather than restricts. The system itself needs to be monitored, evaluated and receive feedback that it can use to improve its operations continuously.

Before we take the five points separately, what exactly do we mean by quality? Is it possible to establish a quality standard for distance education? Is it possible that there will be competing nqtions of quality depending on different perspectives of those involved in the system?

Quality, whether it is in the system, its management, materials or learning effectiveness, indicates that what is required is doing the job effectively and appropriately. Quality has the characteristics of being well thought out, prepared with care, implemented with responsibility, has a firm direction but is flexible enough to cope with contextual variation, and is positively responsive to comment and criticism. What has been done has merit, is credible, is worth repeating and is sustainable over a long period. It is a property of worth that deserves to be treated with respect.

To return to the five points.

First, materials. The materials used in Distance Education are the learning medium and fulfil some of the role of the traditional teacher. They need to be learner friendly as well as academically respectable. An average student must be able to use them alone, whether they be in print or one of the other media. The materials must be interesting in their content and their layout. They have to meet the needs of the curriculum and be seen as relevant by the student.

How do we achieve this?

We must recognise that there is already considerable experience in the structuring of distance learning materials. We learn from other peoples' experience and ensure that the materials developers, (writers, producers, editors and media specialists) are trained in the methodology of Distance Learning and are aware of the special needs of the distance student. It cannot be assumed that every good teacher will naturally prepare good Distance Learning materials. They have been trained in a different tradition and to be effect-tive here they will require guidance and additional training.

Second, availability. It is of the essence that each student will have their materials at the time that they actually need them. Just as goods must be in the market when they are required, the student must have learning materials at the appropriate time.

Similarly if there are materials in media other than print, not only must they be ready on time but the student and tutors must have uncomplicated access to them. There is a responsibility to ensure that equipment is available when required. This has other implications relating to batteries, electricity, maintenance and an ability to operate the equipment.

Third, Distance learning familiarity. The tutors, probably without exception, will have had their own education and training in the traditional mode. They will need to be briefed in the skills of teaching at a distance, the unique needs of the students learning at a distance and their changed role in the new teacher/learner relationship.

The students will be faced with a totally new experience of being autonomous learners not dependent on teacher's every word. They have a self learning responsibility that was never demanded of them before. For the students to work effectively they will have to be taught to become independent learners. All their experience up to this point has made them dependent learners.

Fourth, management. Without effective management of the whole system there can be little chance of success. A system can stumble along but to make the best use of its resources, to achieve quality outputs, that is well educated distance learning students, it has to have an effective management. Whether at the decision making levels in ministries or in implementation management in institutions, management strategies need to be understood by all concerned.

Unless there is awareness of the special needs of the students and the system, it becomes impossible to provide the

correct infrastructure and to fulfil the enabling role of management. Managers should not only understand what they are doing but also believe in it. Seminars and briefing to raise awareness and training to improve performance, are important factors in improving quality.

Fifth, monitoring, evaluation and feedback. In distance education systems, planning and evaluation play a more prominent role than in conventional systems. Evaluation is required at two levels. First, formative evaluation that will allow the system and its materials to be continuously improved to sustain quality. Second, summative evaluation to monitor educational effectiveness, relevance of programmes and economic viability. Both evaluation procedures ensure quality educational programmes and allow strategic planning to take place.

Each part of the system does not operate in a vacuum. Procedures need to be analysed to ensure that programme structures are appropriate and that academic standards are maintained. While each component part of the infrastructure has its own area of responsibility they must relate to each other and have a high level of awareness. This can be achieved through discussion, information exchange, liaison and a monitoring function that keeps track of the way the system is working. Monitoring is achieved through site visits, reports and meetings. Most importantly it relies on

feedback.

Evaluation is an integral part of the planning, programming, implementation, monitoring and budgeting system of any distance education institution and needs to have a time and budget allocation to function properly. It is the process through which one can compare the actual achievements of an activity or group of activities against the original objectives and expected outputs that have been set. In this way a value judgement can be made on the effectiveness, quality and efficiency of implementation of the activities. In addition relevant information can be extrapolated in order to determine the effect and impact of the activities and their long term sustainability.

Feedback rarely happens spontaneously. It needs to be part of the planning and management process to be effective. The usefulness of feedback is determined by the timeliness of the information and the budget available to sustain it. Whether it is the materials that need to be improved or the system that has problems, awareness of the difficulty usually comes through the feedback. Awareness alone is not the solution of the problem. Information is required at the correct time to enable remedial action to be taken and remedial action can be an additional cost that should have been anticipated in the budget.

There are many pressures that those responsible for the materials development and use face. With so much to do, what has been completed is put to one side and the feedback relating to it easily ignored. This is a great pity as the efforts already invested deserve the best final outcomes. Monitoring, evaluation and feedback effectively used, provide us with the necessary mechanisms to ensure a quality system.

Conclusion

The dissemination of distance education will only achieve its objectives if the whole operation is seen to be of real benefit to the students. The whole implementation strategy requires good planning, materials, management and training. The system must be flexible to meet the needs according to local conditions and requirement, and recognise that there are different models that will be appropriate for different parts of the country.

Establishing a distance learning institution is a complex task. To ensure its credibility a constant awareness of quality control is important. To achieve this we need to remember that:

- Quality does not happen by itself. It has to be planned.

- Many providers are new to the field. The expansion of

distance learning provision needs to safeguard standards to achieve quality and to ensure credibility.

- Distance Education and Training will be at a disadvantage if it does not participate in the current widespread initiatives to achieve and demonstrate quality that are taking place in industry, business and commerce.

- The achievement of recognised standards is becoming more important for transfer between institutions and accreditation of learning and courses.

The achievement of quality is not a once-and-for-all process. It must be constantly monitored, updated and maintained to meet the students' requirements, because that is what quality is all about.

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